

(Washington, D.C.) – U.S. Rep. Rush Holt (NJ-12) today wrote to the U.S. House Committee on Armed Services to urge immediate hearings into the apparent mishandling of the remains of deceased servicemembers by the Department of Defense.

“The families of those affected deserve answers, those responsible for failing in their solemn obligation to honor our war dead must be held accountable for their conduct, and loved ones of deceased service members must know that this will never happen again,” Holt wrote.

Earlier this week, [federal investigators reported “gross mismanagement” of human remains at the mortuary of Dover Air Force Base](#), including the loss and improper handling of body parts of fallen soldiers. Holt’s letter urges the Armed Services Committee to hold hearings into these allegations and possible separate abuses.

Holt previously wrote to the Secretary of Defense in September 2011 to seek answers about the mishandling of the remains of SFC Scott R. Smith, who was killed in action in Iraq in 2006. More than a year after Smith’s burial, more of his remains were discovered by the military. These remains were incinerated with medical waste and discarded in a landfill in King George County, Virginia. A copy of Holt’s September letter, which has not previously been released publicly, is [available online](#).

. It is being disclosed at the request of Smith’s widow, who now resides in Frenchtown, New Jersey.

The full text of Holt’s letter today to the Armed Services Committee is below.

“Dear Chairman McKeon and Ranking Member Smith:

“As you are no doubt aware, this week multiple media outlets reported on the failure of Air Force officials to handle properly the remains of fallen American servicemembers at Dover Air Force Base. I request that you hold hearings on this important issue as soon as possible so we can better understand the scope of the problem at Dover and take quick action to remedy any deficiencies in the handling of the remains of those who have given their lives in defense of our country. We must prevent this from ever occurring again.

“Earlier this year, I began looking into this issue based on information provided to me about possible mismanagement of human remains at Dover. The information came from a constituent and war widow directly affected by this issue, Ms. Gari-lynn Smith, who described how her own husband’s remains had been mishandled by Dover personnel. In June 2011, my staff received the following interim response from the legislative affairs staff in the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) regarding my inquiries with respect to changes in procedures at Dover:

“The procedures were put into place as the result of the Central Joint Mortuary Affairs Board recognizing in December 2008 that we could improve upon the Dover disposition process and make it more dignified and respectful...**It is important to note that this was a process improvement initiative and not the result of complaints or findings of non-compliance**.” (emphasis added)

“It is now clear to me that real issues did and may still exist, complaints were made and non-compliance was an all too common occurrence at Dover. Further, I am troubled that despite my inquiry the Department of Defense failed to indicate to me that the Air Force Inspector General was in fact conducting an investigation into the very issues I raised regarding possible misconduct in the handling of human remains by Dover personnel.

“Frustrated by a failure to get clear and definitive answers to my initial inquiries, I wrote directly to Defense Secretary Leon Panetta in September 2011 to get answers to a number of important questions regarding the handling of human remains by the Department of Defense. I am still awaiting a reply to these questions and I have attached a copy of my original letter for your review.

“In light of this week’s developments, I again ask that the Committee immediately initiate hearings and a full investigation into the apparent mishandling of the remains of deceased servicemembers, as well as the entire casualty assistance process. I hope that the questions I have asked Secretary Panetta can be answered directly during such hearings. Additionally, I stand ready to work with you to address this issue and ensure it never occurs again.

“The families of those affected deserve answers, those responsible for failing in their solemn obligation to honor our war dead must be held accountable for their conduct, and loved ones of deceased service members must know that this will never happen again.”

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